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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [HR](#) [SI](#) [IT](#) [EUN](#) [USEU](#) [BRUSSELS](#)

SUBJECT: CROATIA'S PROGRESS TOWARD THE EU HITS A PATCH OF
ROUGH WATER, BUT STILL LOOKING GOOD

REF: A. ZAGREB 1025

[1](#)B. ZAGREB 932

Classified By: Rick Holtzapple, PolOff, Reasons 1.4 B/D

[1](#)1. (C) As reported ref B, Croatia looks very likely to be officially declared a candidate for EU membership at the EU Summit on June 17-18. The most important possible stumbling block, full cooperation with the ICTY in The Hague, remains a non-issue for the EU as long as ICTY Prosecutor del Ponte gives the GoC a positive report card (ref a). Less certain is whether the EU next week will actually set a date for the beginning of accession negotiations, but a number of contacts we met during the course of a USEU-organized Conference on the Balkans June 9 insisted that the only debate is over whether the date should be January, March or June 2005. A French contact insisted that his government was being unfairly cast as a skeptic on EU enlargement in the Balkans. Paris is insisting (with an eye toward the December decision on Turkish candidacy) that the Council reaffirm its autonomy over the decision whether to begin accession talks no matter what the Commission recommendation. But he said France was prepared to see the EU set a date for Croatian negotiations to begin in early 2005, giving the new Commission that will enter into office in November 2004 enough time to prepare such talks.

[1](#)2. (C) According to Italian, Dutch and Croatian contacts in Brussels, the only remaining problem Croatia has is with Slovenia over the Adriatic. Croatia, Italy, Slovenia and the Commission all met on June 4 in Brussels and reached an agreement on how to revise the Croatian declaration of an ecological and fisheries zone. But on June 9, our Italian source (protect) expressed some exasperation that Slovenia appeared to be reconsidering whether the deal was sufficient. According to him, "Italy is prepared to accept any pragmatic solution, while Slovenia views the problem as a matter of principle." Slovenia will force the EU PermReps (COREPER) to revisit the issue in their meeting on June 10. But none of our contacts seemed to believe the problem would block a positive decision for Croatia next week. Separately, when the Croatian Ambassador to the EU told us that "Croatia has done all that it can do" on this issue, the Commission's Head of Unit for Croatia whispered to us in an aside that "for once, that probably is true."

[1](#)3. (C) COMMENT: The Croatians, and several of the other EU Member States, appear to have been taken by surprise at the hard-line Slovene approach. As our Italian contact put it, "We've spent over forty years learning how to compromise. Some of the new Member States are willing to block things even when the vote is 24 to 1." While Ljubljana is apparently trying to get as much leverage from next week's decisions as it can, it still remains among the most active Member States in trying to boost EU assistance and membership prospects for the Balkans as a whole, arguing that all of those countries should be included in "pre-accession" aid programs under the EU's next budget framework beginning in [1](#)2007. END COMMENT.

FOSTER